

## **10** David Gribble

# **Good news for Francisco Ferrer – how anarchist ideals in education have survived around the world<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the educational ideas of Francisco Ferrer, as expressed in his book *The origin and ideals of the Modern School* (1913) and compares these ideas with actual practice in anarchist schools early in the twentieth century. I suggest that a parallel movement grew up during the last century in the progressive or democratic schools which was in many ways closer in spirit to Ferrer than these early anarchist schools. This chapter reviews the fundamental principles of a free education before describing how these may be observed in practice in some of the many schools around the world that may be described variously as democratic, non-authoritarian, non-formal or free. The examples chosen come from many different cultures, and they differ widely from each other, but all are based on respect for the child as a person with the same rights as anyone else. In such schools, ignorant of Ferrer though they may be, many of his ideas have been proved by experience.

### **The Modern School**

Education in Spain in the early 1900s had been dominated by the clergy for centuries. However, the times were changing. The foundation of Ferrer's *Escuela Moderna* in Barcelona, and the publication of his book *The origins and ideals of the Modern School* led to a movement which spread rapidly through Spain and France and even reached the United States.

'In every country,' wrote Ferrer, 'the governing classes, which formerly left education to the clergy, as these were quite willing to educate in a sense of obedience to authority, have now themselves undertaken the direction of schools' (Ferrer, 1913: 26). He described the resulting system as follows:

One word will suffice to characterise it – violence. The school dominates the children physically, morally and intellectually, in order to control the development of their faculties in the way desired, and deprives them of contact with nature in order

to modify them as required. This is the explanation of the failure; the eagerness of the ruling class to control education and the bankruptcy of the hope of the reformers. ‘Education’ means in practice domination or domestication [Editors’ note: probably a mistranslation of ‘domesticar’ which means ‘to tame’]. (Ferrer, 1913: 28)

Ferrer’s reaction was to assert that ‘the whole value of education consists in respect for the physical, intellectual and moral faculties of the child’, and ‘the true educator is he who does not impose his own ideas and will on the child, but appeals to its own energies’ (p. 28).

Such ideas might appear in the prospectus of any modern progressive school, but some of Ferrer’s views are even more advanced. On the subject of punishment, he said:

The teachers who offer their services to the Modern School, or ask our recommendation to teach in similar schools, must refrain from any moral or material punishment, under penalty of being excluded permanently. Scolding, impatience and anger ought to disappear with the ancient title of ‘master’. In free schools all should be peace, gladness and fraternity. We trust that this will suffice to put an end to these practices, which are most improper in people whose sole ideal is the training of a generation fitted to establish a really fraternal, harmonious and just state of society. (p. 31)

‘We are convinced’, he said, ‘that the education of the future will be entirely spontaneous.’ This suggests support for the idea of leaving it to the children to choose when to learn, but he immediately stepped back a little from such an extreme position:

It is plain that we cannot wholly realise this, but the evolution of methods in the direction of a broader comprehension of life and the fact that all improvement involves the suppression of violence indicate that we are on solid ground when we look to science for the liberation of the child. (p. 28)

He was, of course, not the only anarchist of his time to believe that his views could be justified scientifically (see Woodcock (1975: part 1)), and he goes on to state his faith in rationality:

We shall develop living brains capable of reacting to our instruction. We shall take care that the minds of our pupils will sustain, when they leave the control of their teachers, a stern hostility to prejudice; that they will be solid minds, capable of forming their own rational convictions on every subject. (pp. 15–16)

The children’s minds are to be hostile to prejudice, but their brains are to react to their teachers’ instruction, and the pupils themselves are, until they leave the school, to be under the control of the teachers. Ferrer goes on to put this even more explicitly:

This does not mean that we shall leave the child at the very outset of its education, to form its own ideas. The Socratic procedure is wrong if it is taken too literally. The very constitution of the mind, at the commencement of its development, demands that at this stage the child should be receptive. The teacher must implant the germ of ideas. (p. 16)

Here is the reforming teacher's dilemma: how can you change the world for the better without preaching?

Over the last century, as I shall show, it has been demonstrated in many different contexts that preaching is unnecessary. Children have a natural curiosity and eagerness to learn and a natural concern for the well-being of the people around them. They do not need preaching; they need freedom.

Ferrer was only part of the way towards this understanding, but that was already a great deal further on than the ordinary representative of the governing classes. What Ferrer says in criticism of the educational practice of his time is still largely true today:

Much of the knowledge actually imparted in schools is useless; and the hope of reformers has been void because the organisation of the school, instead of serving an ideal purpose, has become one of the most powerful instruments of servitude in the hands of the ruling class. The teachers are merely conscious or unconscious organs of their will, and have been trained on their principles from their tenderest years, and more drastically than anybody, they have endured the discipline of authority. Very few have escaped this despotic domination; they are generally powerless against it, because they are oppressed by the scholastic organisation to such an extent that they have nothing to do but obey. (p. 27)

Ferrer felt that the reformist teachers of his time, who were hoping to improve schools from the inside, were merely using better methods of imposing views required by the authorities, and that a more fundamental change was necessary. What we see nowadays in Britain is that the would-be reformist teachers inside the system, of whom there used to be many, are being driven out of the profession altogether.

“‘The school’ is the cry of every party,’ wrote Ferrer (p. 27), and so it is today, but because the establishment does not understand the importance of freedom – because, indeed, they regard it with a kind of horrified dread and associate it with rioting and delinquency – they persist in imposing restrictive legislation which make rioting and delinquency more likely.

Ferrer's own school was closed by the authorities in 1906, after only five years of existence. Ferrer himself was executed in 1909 for allegedly leading a rebellion in Barcelona, and the Modern Schools all over the world died out over the next thirty years. The last Modern School in Britain, the International Modern School in Whitechapel, London, ran only from 1921 to 1928.

### **The New Schools movement compared with anarchist schools**

The New Schools movement in Britain, which must be distinguished from the Modern Schools movement, was founded by middle-class teachers looking for an alternative to the public school system. It included Bedales (Hampshire), Abbotsholme (Derbyshire) and King Alfred's (north London) – all expensive private schools which are flourishing today. They were joined by the progressive

schools of the 1920s, of which the sole survivor is Summerhill, though Dartington Hall School in Devon lasted until 1987. Most of the New Schools drifted away from their original more radical ideas, in the same way as people often do as they get older, and this drift was strengthened by the demands of parents for more and better exam results. Only Summerhill (currently in Suffolk, East Anglia) successfully resisted this trend.

Summerhill still exists, but the Ferrer schools have gone.

John Shotton, whose book, *No master high or low* (1993), gives a fascinating account of what he defines as ‘libertarian education and schools, 1890–1990’, makes a distinction between ‘libertarian education’ and ‘progressivism’. He states that there is a considerable overlap, but adds: ‘This has more to do with the rhetoric of progressivism than its practice. This is because, while claiming to be child-centred, in reality progressivism was and is teacher-centred’ (p. 9).

I would argue that many of the anarchist schools at the beginning of the twentieth century were at least as teacher-centred as the progressive schools. La Ruche, Sébastien Faure’s school at Rambouillet in France, much admired by Emma Goldman (1907: 390ff.) had the following timetable:

	<i>Morning</i>	<i>Afternoon</i>
Monday	Grammar	Mental arithmetic
	Dictation	Geometry
	Construing	Explanation of reading
Tuesday	Vocabulary	Music
	Composition	Shorthand
	Corrections	Recitation
Wednesday	History of civilisation	Maths
	Geography or history	English
	Preparation	Outing
	Drawing	
Thursday	Science	Esperanto
	Dictation	Metric system
	Corrections	Handwriting
Friday	Geography	Music
	Composition	Drawing
	Corrections	Maths
Saturday	Reading	Problems
	Study – overview of all the working week	English
		Baths
		Sewing
		Ironing, cleaning, etc.

Source: Faure, 1915: 41 (cited in Grunder, 1993: 87).

This hardly seems like a timetable devised by children. The photographs of the school in the same book have no feeling of cheerful informality. There is one of an actual lesson (Grunder, 1993: 96) which shows children crammed into desks, sometimes three to a double desk, all with their heads turned towards a teacher who is delivering some kind of explanation, clearly the most important person in the room. The photograph may be posed, but the situation represented is presumably what was thought to be ideal.

At the Liverpool Anarchist-Communist Sunday School (1908–16), which was organised to ‘. . . break down prejudices that are set up in the weekday school . . . To teach a child to think and act for itself . . . To spread the idea of Internationalism’ (cited in Shotton, 1993: 44), there were frequent lectures on political topics. Even Nellie Dick, organising her own school in the East End of London at the age of 13, said that when they started they ‘sang songs and talked about anarchism’ (cited in Shotton, 1993: 38). The adults who ran such schools taught anarchism in the belief, shared by many anarchists of their time, that they were not expounding a doctrine, but only exposing children to the scientific truth (see also Woodcock, 1975: part 1). Writers who discuss schools of any kind generally discuss the ideas of the adults running them rather than the experiences of the children attending them. In accounts of anarchist schools, the names of Sébastien Faure, Nellie Dick and Francisco Ferrer are inevitably seen to be more important than the names of their pupils.

The difference between the ideals of the progressives and the anarchists was more to do with politics and class than with the relative status of adults and children. They were all aiming for the same kind of relationship, but the anarchist schools were for the working class. Most of the progressive schools were obliged, because of the State’s reluctance to support innovation, to depend on parents who could afford to pay fees.

Summerhill suffered the same fate, even though one of the major influences on A. S. Neill was Homer Lane’s Little Commonwealth, a home for young orphans and adolescents referred either by the courts or their own parents, which was supported by the Home Office. Homer Lane believed in innate goodness and individual freedom. The Little Commonwealth was governed by a citizen’s court, and the only rules were made by the citizens themselves (Bridgeland, 1971: 102ff.). The same could be said of Summerhill, but Summerhill could only survive as an independent school. Neill once said, ‘My school could be run with proletariat pupils without any change of method and principle’ (Neill, 1945: 96) but later he so far forgot his mentor’s work that when Mary Leue, founder of the Albany Free School in New York State, asked for his advice about starting a Summerhill school with working-class children, he said he thought she would be mad to try (cited in Appleton, 2001, from a personal communication between Neill and Mary Leue in 1968).

About most other aspects of education, the progressives and the anarchists spoke with one voice. It is interesting to match quotations from Ferrer with others from progressive educators of the 1920s:

I would rather have the free spontaneity of a child who knows nothing than the verbal knowledge and intellectual deformation of one that has experienced the existing system of education. (Ferrer, 1913: 29)

I would rather see a school produce a happy street cleaner than a neurotic scholar. (A. S. Neill, cited in Lamb, 1992: 9)

Having . . . started from the principles of solidarity and equality we are not prepared to create a new inequality. Hence in the Modern School there will be no rewards and no punishments. (Ferrer, 1913: 30)

We find ourselves departing, for purely educational reasons, from the tradition that marks and competition are necessary in order to secure an adequate standard of effort and efficiency. (Curry, 1934: 59)

We can destroy whatever there is in the actual school that savours of violence, all the artificial devices by which children are estranged from nature and life, the intellectual and moral discipline which has been used to impose ready-made thoughts, all beliefs which deprave and enervate the will. (Ferrer, 1913: 29)

Therefore no corporal punishment, indeed no punishment at all; no prefects; no uniforms; no Officers' Training Corps; no segregation of the sexes; no compulsory games, compulsory religion or compulsory anything else; no more Latin, no more Greek; no competition; no jingoism. (Young, 1982: 131)

I have found no reference to Ferrer in the writings of the progressives. The quotation from Curry above comes from a book edited by Trevor Blewitt called *The modern schools handbook*, published in 1934. Unselfconsciously he used the term 'modern schools' to describe a collection of variously progressive independent establishments. The rebellion against the public school system described by Michael Young seems to have remained ignorant of the rebellion against the clerical education in Spain described by Francisco Ferrer, even though their manifestos are so similar.

### A wide range of schools

This mutual unawareness has continued up to the present day, not only between progressives and anarchists but also between individual organisations. Teachers in non-authoritarian schools are usually far too busy with their pupils to spend time on theory and comparison. My own experience of free education was first teaching at Dartington Hall School and then, when it closed, at Sands School, which was founded to develop the tradition. When I retired from Sands School in 1992, I knew of only half a dozen other similar schools, mostly in the United Kingdom. Now I have had the time to get to know of something approaching a hundred, all round the world, but my hundred will not be the same as anyone else's hundred, and most of my hundred know little or nothing about each other. IDEC, the International Democratic Education Conference, has been bringing different people together every year since 1993, but it is not well known, and even

those attending a conference will only have time to get to know a few of the other participants. In case the word ‘democratic’ shocks anarchists, I should say that the two 15-year-old students who were running the IDEC at Sands in 1997 chose the name. They did not like the name, but could not think of a better one, and it has been generally accepted because of its ‘PR’ value – no government or newspaper could comfortably object to the idea of democratic education, whereas ‘libertarian’, ‘free’, ‘progressive’ or ‘anarchist’ education would be under immediate attack. Most of the schools that attend the conferences have some kind of formal meeting where the students participate in decision-making, but some places have no rules, and all are committed to the idea of respect for the individual child.

To illustrate the diversity of the modern scene, here is a scattering of relevant schools and organisations: Sudbury Valley School, Massachusetts; the School of Self-Determination, Moscow; Tokyo Shure, Japan; le Centre Energie, Madagascar; Krätzä, Berlin; Tamariki, Christchurch, New Zealand; Highfield Junior School, Plymouth, England; la Fundación Educativa Pestalozzi, Quito, Ecuador; Sands School, Ashburton, England; the Democratic School of Hadera, Israel; Dr. Albizo Campos Puerto Rican High School, Chicago; the Butterflies organisation for street and working children, Delhi; Moo Baan Dek children’s village, Thailand.

I have met people from all these places, and visited all but three of them. They are different from each other in their social composition and in their geographical position and in many details of organisation. The list includes three government-supported schools, two organisations for street children, five fee-paying schools and three places that depend on charitable support. There are urban and rural schools, boarding and day institutions, climates ranging from the tropical to the Muscovite and a combined age range from 2 to 20. They are all highly individual and most would probably be inclined to resist being lumped together with the others; they would emphasise their differences rather than their similarities.

However, in spite of this individualistic attitude, and in spite of the fact that they have developed in countries with cultures as different from each other as those of Japan, India and Soviet Russia, they share a central core of common values. As far as I know, none of these schools started from anarchist principles, but what they have in common with each other they also have in common with Francisco Ferrer. I match their guiding principles here with quotations from *The origin and ideals of the Modern School*:

1 Reliance on reason rather than doctrine.

‘Education is not worthy of the name unless it be stripped of all dogmatism’  
(Ferrer, 1913: 28).

2 Self-government or shared responsibility.

‘Every pupil shall go forth . . . into social life with the ability to be his own master and guide his own life in all things’ (p. 30).

3 Freedom to choose.

'The education of the future will be entirely spontaneous' (p. 28).

4 Equality.

'Having admitted and practiced the co-education of boys and girls, of rich and poor – having, that is to say, started from the principle of solidarity and equality – we are not prepared to create a new inequality' (p. 30).

5 Respect for and trust in the individual child.

'The whole value of education consists in respect for the physical, intellectual, and moral faculties of the child' (p. 28).

These principles manifest themselves in different ways in different places (and are described in greater detail in *Real education: varieties of freedom*, and *Lifelines*, both by David Gribble). For example, at Sudbury Valley there are no lessons. Staff members are not supposed to propose activities, because that would influence the students; the students must decide for themselves what they want to do. On the other hand, there are numerous rules and regulations, and the Justice Committee, which deals with breaches of these, often imposes punishments, such as exclusion from a particular area, or additional work for the community.

Sands School, on the other hand, has a full timetable of (voluntary) lessons, as few rules as possible, and no system of punishment. When the school started, Andrew Edwards, one of the students, formulated this disciplinary policy in one simple sentence: 'Common sense takes the place of rules.'

At the Fundación Educativa Pestalozzi, staff members are told that teaching, explaining, guiding, motivating, persuading, anticipating and pointing out are not adequate interactions between an adult and a child. There is a prepared environment with a variety of opportunities for learning and playing within which the children are left absolutely free to choose whatever they want to do. The fact that most of the time they play is considered appropriate.

At the Puerto Rican High School, in an area of Chicago where gang warfare is rife, every student who comes to the school is expected to attend a full timetable of lessons. Outside the school there is aimlessness and danger; within the school the students welcome the security they find in a structured day. There is an easy-going and affectionate relationship between staff and students, and students show the self-respect resulting from the confident assertion of national identity and personal rights. There is a twice weekly school meeting, chaired by students, which is informal and co-operative.

Even non-authoritarian schools usually keep a record of attendance, and require all students to attend every day, unless they have some good reason for absence. Tokyo Shure, on the other hand, is a school for school-refusers, so children who are enrolled there do not have to attend. The building is simply open until 7 o'clock in the evening each weekday, and there are classes and other activities available for those who choose to come. When I visited the school there were

a hundred children on the roll, but usually only fifty or so present at any given time.

The Butterflies organisation for street and working children in Delhi goes even further – it does not even have a school building. The street educators work in public places, and the children who want to learn take time off from their rag-picking, portering, shoe-cleaning or other work in order to come to them. Many of the adults around would prefer the children to continue working, and actively discourage them from taking part.

Of the organisations I have visited, only two regularly engage in formal political action – the Puerto Rican High School in Chicago and Butterflies in Delhi. The American students protest about political prisoners and police violence, demonstrate in support of funding for youth and take part in programmes to raise awareness about sexually transmitted diseases. The Delhi children march to protect their own rights and to protest against children being locked up in so-called observation homes; they organise press conferences and public meetings to air their problems; and during the war with Pakistan (the 1999 Kargil conflict) they collected money from their pitiful wages to support child victims.

Children at an ideal anarchist school should presumably be left to decide for themselves whether they should take part in political protest. At Butterflies and the Puerto Rican High School, the opportunity to do so is part of the culture.

Students from other, more sheltered environments are less active, but their experience of a community that is at least attempting to create an environment of justice usually leads them to socially responsible attitudes. They are seldom motivated by acquisitiveness, and when they leave school a disproportionate number become teachers, artists or social workers, or join the medical profession. In Britain, many take up ecological issues or become members of organisations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace or the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), but perhaps their comfortable schooling has not given them enough reason to rebel. In 1945, A. S. Neill wrote the following about ex-students of Summerhill: ‘Politically most of them are left wing, and some have joined the Communist Party, while others, though left, cannot subscribe to the Party Line because they value their inner freedom too much’ (Neill, 1945: 87).

The philosophies and practical models on which these organisations are based also vary widely. Rebeka and Mauricio Wild of the Fundación Educativa Pestalozzi were inspired by, among others, Maria Montessori and the English primary schools of the 1960s; several schools acknowledge a debt to A. S. Neill and Summerhill, and Moo Baan Dek explicitly bases its practice on a Buddhist interpretation of Neill; the Centre Energie in Madagascar and many South American street children’s organisations were started by Roman Catholics, who seem to have abandoned the idea of clerical authority and taken Christianity back to such apparently un-Catholic texts as ‘Love thy neighbour as thyself’, and ‘Go and sell that thou hast, and give the money to the poor’; David Wills ran the Barns Hostel in Scotland in the 1940s, where thirty evacuee boys, thought to be

too unruly to be billeted on any ordinary family, ran their own community for a period of eight months without intervention from the staff – he was a Quaker; and Sudbury Valley acknowledges a debt to Neill, but bases its constitution on the New England town meetings.

### **Not theory, but practice**

The projects described above originate from an enormously wide variety of starting-points, and the range becomes even larger when you include the schools that do not acknowledge any particular inspiration. Such schools emerged, not as practical examples of educational theory, but as solutions to problems, and they developed pragmatically. Many, but not all, have emerged in Third World countries where education for the poor is almost unobtainable.

Seliba Sa Boithuto, in Lesotho in southern Africa, is self-study centre. It provides learners with a quiet, comfortable place to learn, materials (books, pamphlets, computers and videos) to learn from and tutors for advice and help. It offers no courses. The tutors do not teach, but they encourage students to learn together and to learn from each other. Most of the learners are young people who cannot go to school, either because of lack of funds or because they are semi-employed, but there are also adults taking correspondence courses, secretaries who wish to obtain computer skills, and people who wish to improve their English.

Tokyo Shure was founded to help some of the large numbers of children for whom the academic pressure, the conformity and the bullying by other children and by staff in the conventional Japanese State schools was unbearable; it was not just a problem of school refusal, it was a problem of frequent child suicide. It started with a series of negatives – no uniform, no punishment, no pressure and not even any obligation to attend. It offers a curriculum which changes from month to month, according to the requests of its students. It is run, like most of the schools I have mentioned, by a school meeting where staff and students have equal status.

The Kleingruppe Lufingen, in the Swiss Canton of Zurich, was founded as part of an experiment to help the children thought to have problems too severe for even the special schools to cope with. The children were divided into groups of six, each of which had one teacher and a building of its own. Here too they started with a strong negative: the buildings were not to be associated with schools. Jürg Jegge, who ran the Kleingruppe Lufingen, treated his pupils as friends and allowed them to do whatever they liked, as long as they did not interfere with each other. One of the things they liked to do was to learn, and in between pottery and chat and theatre visits and keeping rabbits and cooking meals and restoring an old car and a hundred other things, these young people learnt self-respect, and they learnt to read and write.

The Butterflies organisation was founded to meet the needs of the street and

working children in Delhi. (The distinction is that street children have no homes to go to, whereas working children live with their families.) Rita Panicker, the founder of the organisation, told me,

Participation is a difficult thing because each one of us has been socialised in different ways. And one of the socialisations is that elders never consult. They talk at you. Therefore every day I have to ask myself, Did I consult the children? 'Did I listen to what they were saying? Or was I just hearing a little bit, and I made my own decisions?'

The inspiration does not come from any educational theorist, but from the children themselves.

The Puerto Rican High School in Chicago was founded by a group of eight students who had all been expelled from the local high school for fomenting a student strike. The strike had been in protest against the sacking of two teachers who had been teaching Puerto Rican history and culture, and speaking Spanish in the classroom. The State high schools existed to teach children to be good Americans, not to discover their own roots. The Puerto Rican High School started with volunteer teachers working in a church basement. Many of the students had family problems, drug problems, gang problems or all three. Leading figures from the district came in to talk about these issues, and to help the students to regain their self-respect. The curriculum was decided by the students. The teachers found a new role as organisers rather than authority figures.

### Evolving out of diversity

The cultures from which these different schools have emerged also vary widely. The Japanese writer Yoshiaki Yamamura has commented that:

Christian cultures, with their view of human beings as fallen creatures, who can regain an honest life only a little at a time and with divine assistance, seem to regard human nature as inherently evil. The same may be said for Freudian concepts, with their identification of sexual desire and aggressiveness in children. In contrast, the Japanese tend to think of children as inherently good. (Yamamura, 1986: 35)

At the same time, the Japanese attach enormous importance to conformity and hierarchy, whereas Westerners tend to admire the exceptional and to resent authority. In Thailand it is disrespectful to raise your head above the level of the heads of your superiors. The consequent behaviour looks servile to a Western eye, but in Thailand is merely courtesy.

In Delhi the street children are regarded as worthless urchins, but nevertheless they are shocked by the treatment of the street children in parts of South America. The School for Self-Determination in Moscow was founded in Soviet Russia, before *glasnost* and *perestroika*, whereas Dartington Hall School was an expensive independent school in a democracy. Tokyo Shure is in an office building in a

huge city; Moo Baan Dek is in a loose group of specially designed buildings in a forest beside the banks of the river Kwaе; Butterflies has no classrooms at all. Summerhill reached England in 1924, after three years as an international school in Germany; England in the 1920s was a very different place from England in 1987, when Sands School was founded. The Democratic School of Hadera is in Israel, where its open-heartedness stands out in what is often a brutally nationalistic community.

In spite of these wide variations in inspiration, methods and context, all these places have come to share a common set of values, and I think Ferrer would have felt at ease in any of them. Although they are not explicitly based on anarchist ideals, they present examples of such ideals in practice. The fact that similar systems have evolved from such varied beginnings, and in particular that they have evolved in situations presenting such apparently intractable problems, suggests that the common approach must have some universal validity.

### **A really fraternal, harmonious and just state of society**

In a passage I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Ferrer stated that: 'In free schools all should be peace, gladness and fraternity.' He went on to say that for teachers in a Modern School the 'sole ideal is the training of a generation fitted to establish a really fraternal, harmonious and just state of society'.

This, then, was Ferrer's primary aim. The primary aim in most, if not all, of the places I have described, is helping individual children to retain or to regain their natural self-respect, eagerness to learn and interest in and concern for the general welfare. In these schools, too, all should be peace, gladness and fraternity.

Should the development of the individual child come first, or the development of society? In their enthusiasm for the latter, the early anarchist educators overlooked the importance of the former.

The concept of anarchist education is self-contradictory. The word education on its own suggests control, and as soon as you attach an adjective to it – religious education, physical education – it attracts a ring of the pulpit or the parade ground. No matter how sound your principles, from an anarchist standpoint it should be wrong to require others to accept them. One of the nineteenth-century headmasters of Eton is alleged to have said, 'I will have happy, smiling faces around me if I have to flog every boy in the school to achieve it.' Although Ferrer denounced the flogging, he expected to find happy smiling faces as a consequence of instruction and example – an only slightly more rational idea. He apparently failed to understand that you can only create an atmosphere 'peace, gladness and fraternity' by such methods as are practised in the non-authoritarian organisations I have been describing.

## Rules and punishments

Where Ferrer went further than many of the progressive schools was in ruling out punishments. Many supposedly non-authoritarian schools do in fact have many rules, and punish those who break them.

Sudbury Valley, about which Daniel Greenberg, one of the founders, has written a book called *Free at last* (1987), has so many rules that they need a book to contain them. I was told that it was easier for adults to step in when there was a crisis, because they could refer to rules and not have to wait for some communal decision.

Summerhill uses one of its two weekly meetings to deal with breaches of rules and to impose punishments. One explanation given is that the rules are devised by the children themselves, and the breaches of rules are dealt with by the whole community, not merely by the adults. Another is the fear that if you have no rules then the adults will simply take over. A third is that children like making rules and feel protected by them.

There is no doubt that children at schools like Summerhill and Sudbury do really feel that they are free and in charge of their own lives; they have a dignity and self-possession that is rare in any child from a conventional school. (It is also true that many of the rules at Sudbury are descriptive of administrative systems rather than restrictions on behaviour. At Summerhill, by contrast, most of the rules are about behaviour – bedtimes, going into the town, borrowing bicycles, building camps or whatever happens to be fashionable at the time.) There are, though, schools which exemplify Ferrer's principle by managing perfectly well without punishments, and even without rules, and some have made clear statements about the reasons for this.

The 1994/95 prospectus for Mirambika, the Sri Aurobindo school in Delhi, states:

Punishment does not help the child to surmount difficulties. It builds a wall, creates divisions and an atmosphere in which it is very difficult to listen to the inner truth. Answering negative behaviour of children crudely with restriction means that at that very moment we give up our belief in basic goodness. Let us remember that sometimes the child has to experiment a little with a dark corner in himself in order to consciously choose and own light.

Lois Holzman, one of the directors of the Barbara Taylor School in New York, explains that it is wrong to punish children for their failures because, firstly, we are all responsible for each other, so the failings are the school's and not the child's; secondly, to exclude children is to deprive them of the one environment that is therapeutic for them; and thirdly, people who punish avoid having to discuss, and discussion is what leads to change.

David Horsburgh, describing Neel Bagh, the school in rural Bangalore which he ran for twelve years from 1972 until his death in 1984, wrote this: 'No punishments are given, either as a retaliation for some supposed offence, or as a deterrent to

some future one; nor is there a school council to award punishments which the teacher does not like to give himself' (p. 3).

David Wills, of the Barns evacuee hostel, listed many reasons for avoiding punishment:

1. It establishes a base motive for conduct.
2. It has been tried, and has failed; or alternatively, it has been so mis-used in the past as to destroy its usefulness now.
3. It militates against the establishment of the relationship which we consider necessary between staff and children – a relationship in which the child must feel himself to be loved.
4. Many delinquent children (and adults) are seeking punishment as a means of assuaging their guilt-feelings.

But that is not all; there is still another. When the offender has 'paid for' his crime, he can 'buy' another with an easy conscience. (Wills, 1945: 22)

Wills also made the astonishing assertion that punishment shifts responsibility for behaviour onto the adult, instead of leaving it with the child (Wills, 1942: 9). On reflection I find I agree with him.

At even a Utopian school there must be occasions when a child disrupts the desired atmosphere of peace, gladness and fraternity. At the *Escuela Moderna* there was to be neither moral nor material punishment, said Ferrer, and scolding, impatience and anger were to be unknown. This left explanation and discussion as the only alternatives, and Ferrer explicitly stated this:

If any child were conspicuous for merit, application, laziness, or bad conduct, we pointed out to it the need of accord, or the unhappiness of lack of accord, with its own welfare and that of others, and the teacher might give a lecture on the subject. Nothing more was done. (1913: 30)

David Horsburgh, after describing what seems like an ideal situation, omits to say what was done when there was anti-social behaviour. The answer may be that he himself was regarded with such respect that his disapproval was enough. This may well not have been what he intended, but when I interviewed an ex-pupil, Vijayalakshmi, she told me about an occasion when she tore out the last page of her exercise book in order to get a new one:

And he asked me, 'What happened to this page?' And I said, 'I tore it.'

And he said, 'No, never do that. Because everything has its own value.'

That's it. He never scolded, but that was enough. (Gibble, 1998: 121)

Charismatic figures cannot shed their charisma. W. B. Curry at Dartington, Daniel Greenberg at Sudbury Valley and Jürg Jegge at the Kleingruppe Lufingen are other examples of highly articulate and powerful personalities at the head of free schools. Their personal convictions make it extremely difficult for them not to assert their views in ways which dominate the argument, and may prevent children from developing their own moral ideas. Charisma can help to make valuable ideas known in the public sphere, but it is nearly always damaging to those

nearest to it. In a school, teachers and children may be prevented from exploring their own ideas, and fall back on unquestioning acceptance and a complacent intellectual idleness.

It is difficult for any adult to stand back and allow children to work things out for themselves. 'It would be so much quicker and easier,' a teacher is inclined to feel, 'if I simply told them.' With a charismatic adult it would indeed be quicker and easier, but the essential aim is neither speed nor ease, but understanding. There is a vital difference between recognising right behaviour because one understands what is right about it, and recognising right behaviour because one remembers what has been told by some dominant personality.

### **Freedom or neglect?**

Another question that has to be answered if genuinely anarchistic education is to develop, is where the boundaries are between freedom and neglect. Are adults not to intervene when a 10-year-old has still not shown any interest in learning to read? Are playground fights to be allowed to run their course, even if there is plainly bullying involved?

### **Reading**

Some schools insist that children will learn to read and write in their own time, without any pressure or support. Sudbury Valley and the Fundación Pestalozzi in Ecuador claim success for that view after several decades of experience. However, in A. S. Neill's time at Summerhill, children occasionally left at the age of 16 unable to read, with Neill still maintaining that they would learn to read when they needed to. Summerhill has now changed its views, as has the Democratic School of Hadera, which also started out believing that reading did not have to be taught. Tamariki School, in New Zealand, has a more explicit policy:

In this school a very clear pattern of learning to read has emerged. About 35% of children learn to read with minimal or no instruction, usually by 7, about 50% with a fair degree of teacher support and input, usually by 9 to 9%, and the remaining 15% require intensive teacher help. Teachers should be alert from 8 years on to identify children in this last group. While no firm guidelines can be given and each child's difficulties must be carefully evaluated, remedial assistance should be given as soon as the child will permit. (Tamariki, 1989)

Most children who go to the Butterflies street educators learn to read in six months, but, although disadvantaged, they are highly motivated, and may possibly be a self-selecting group of above-average ability.

I quoted earlier the weekly timetable at La Ruche, the school so enthusiastically approved by Emma Goldman. It included one session for reading, two for

dictation, one for handwriting and three for corrections. The idea of leaving it to the children to decide when they were going to learn to read and write does not seem to have arisen.

A hundred years later, experience has shown that a rigid timetable like that at La Ruche is unnecessary, but there are still differences of opinions as to the degree of adult intervention that is helpful.

### Maintaining order in the community

Over what in a conventional school would be called ‘disciplinary issues’ there are also wide variations. At the Barbara Taylor School, the whole community is held responsible. At Summerhill, individuals are judged by the community and often punished. At Sudbury Valley and Hadera, the judgement is made by a committee consisting of several children and one adult. At Tamariki, children call together small meetings of three or four people to deal with disagreements on the spot.

Where the atmosphere is really one of peace, gladness and fraternity there are very few behaviour problems. When the only children present are the ones who have chosen to be there, a lesson is not likely to be interrupted, and if it is interrupted, the other members of the group are likely to intervene. When children can leave the room to go to the lavatory without asking for permission, a common source of stress is removed. When adults don’t have to pick on children for wearing the wrong clothes or for talking in the corridors, they are able to form genuine friendships. When the premises really belong to the children, they will tolerate a greater degree of mess than is acceptable to adults, but most will share in a sense of responsibility for keeping the place at least comfortable and usable. When children are free, they pursue their own personal aims, and usually these aims require an orderly environment if they are to be fulfilled.

Order in non-authoritarian schools is generally maintained by relying on the good sense of the free child, and when that fails, the will of the community usually prevails. The way this is expressed varies from one organisation to another, but there is ample evidence for the success of this approach.

### Conclusion

Over the last hundred years there has been increased recognition of the merits of freedom in schools, but it has not been under the anarchist flag. Even Bonaventure, a small school on the Ile d’Oléron off the west coast of France (sadly closed down in 2002), which happily proclaimed itself to be libertarian and was financially supported by, among others, anarchists and anarchist organisations, was cautious about using the word anarchist in describing its own practice. One of the reasons was a disapproval of the teaching of any doctrine. (Ferrer also disapproved, but he believed at the same time that the teachers should be in

control and should ‘implant the germ of ideas.’) Another reason is the way anarchy is misunderstood, and the harsh public attitude to the word anarchy. A third is ignorance: very few teachers in the schools I have been describing have any idea of how close their methods are to anarchism. A fourth reason is that most of the long-lived free schools (in Britain, at least) have had to be independent from State control, and have therefore had to charge fees, so inevitably creating a division based on wealth that is unacceptable to any principled anarchist.

Nevertheless, there have been examples of State support for non-authoritarian initiatives for children in Britain: the Barns Hostel (Peebles, Scotland, 1940 to 1944), Countesthorpe College (Leicestershire, from 1970), the Conisburgh experiment (Derbyshire, September 1971 to September 1973), Risinghill (London, early 1960s), the White Lion Street Free School (London, 1972 to 1990), Prestolee (Lancashire, 1918 to 1951), Highfield Junior School (Plymouth, transformation of the school effected by Lorna Farrington, during her headship, starting in 1991) and many others, though they have often had to try to avoid public notice in order to continue to do what they think right. The Free School movement of the 1960s also flourished briefly in Britain (see Shotton, 1993).

Outside Britain there are many schools and organisations supported by charity in the Developing World that have offered lifelines to children living in great deprivation. In Israel, surprisingly, the Institute for Democratic Education is working on the democratisation of over a hundred schools. In Guatemala, the government is taking advice from the Collegio Naleb, a school that developed its own variety of freedom after attempting to start as an exclusive school for able children. In Thailand, the government has decreed that all schools must produce plans for changing over to child-centred education – a sudden change that may well be doomed to failure because it is being attempted in a country where most teaching depends on rote learning and teachers do not understand what is being asked of them. The *Netzwerk für selbstbestimmtes Lernen* (Network for autonomous learning) in Austria has twenty-seven member schools. Scandinavia’s State education is already liberal, but even so there are schools like the Forsøksgymnaset in Oslo, Norway, which was started by students who were unsatisfied with the education they were receiving. There are so many independent free schools in Denmark that they have a separate organisation of their own recognised by the State, the Dansk Friskoleforening (although how many of these are genuinely libertarian or liberating remains uncertain).

The freedom that reigns in many of these schools is in some respects wider than anything imagined by Faure or Ferrer. The absence of the red and black flag should not disguise the fact that anarchist ideals have been and are being developed and their relationship with democracy is being explored in a practical way in hundreds and perhaps thousands of schools and other organisations for children around the world. The success of these experiments must surely be a prelude to wider change.

**Notes**

- 1 I would like to thank Craig Fees at the PETT Archive for his help in chasing up references (Planned Environment Therapy Trust Archive and Study Centre, Church Lane, Toddington, near Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL54 5DQ, United Kingdom. 01242 620125. [www.pettarchiv.org.uk](http://www.pettarchiv.org.uk)).